

The framed Van Gogh paradox

A short story by Machiel van der Stelt



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The framed Van Gogh paradox

Today, exactly five years ago on the thirteenth of May 1986, Klaas started to work at the Van Gogh museum as a museum conservationist. He got hired for his exceptional qualities in repairing and researching paintings, which stemmed from his great love for Van Gogh paintings. As much as Klaas was disciplined working on these paintings, as little he was disciplined outside of his work. This resulted in situations where he would be late for appointments and regularly for his work too. On those occasions he would be rushing to the museum on his bicycle, criss-crossing through the traffic; then, when approaching Paulus Potter Street from the relatively quiet Honthorst Street, Klaas would always see Villa Alsb erg. This building was prominently situated across the street its façade reaching the sky. The big windows gazing upon him made him always dream of Van Gogh's painting 'The Church at Auvers'. But soon enough the traffic noise would wake him up from his daydreaming.

He would continue his ride into work and in an attempt to avoid traffic he would then quickly turn right, straight onto the footpath of Paulus Potter Street, to continue riding his Van Gogh style painted bicycle, successfully avoiding stammering and complaining pedestrians. At this point he would increase the speed by pounding his feet with his Van Gogh style painted shoes on the bicycle peddles. Only a short time later, the beige colored building of the Van Gogh museum would appear in his sight. Now the most dangerous part of his trip had arrived: he would speed up, turning his wheels like windmills in a storm, hoping that no tram would approach.

Without looking for other traffic, he would race cross the tram tracks in the Paulus Potter Street, thinking that the tram rails strokes reminded him of the cart tracks in the 'Wheat-field with Crows', another Van Gogh painting. Finally, at the Museum's entrance he would yell "Excuse me, excuse me, let me go through!" thereby narrowly avoiding museum visitors who were waiting outside. Next he would jump off his bicycle to go straight to the staff entrance. As much careless as Klaas was outside the museum, as meticulous he was inside the museum when he was working on his paintings.

Klaas reported to Timothy, the director of the Van Gogh Museum. Timothy had good business acumen and he was always thinking of ways to improve the efficiency of the Van Gogh Museum. Timothy felt that the Van Gogh paintings were, a secondary source of income. The paintings, he felt, were just a side show and he was more interested in making a profit through the museum shop, Timothy's favorite part of the museum.

Because of last month's spectacular theft, when on April the 14th dozens of famous paintings worth one billion guilders, were stolen at gunpoint and then returned badly damaged a short

time later, had resulted in a significant increase of visitors to the Van Gogh Museum. When Timothy had heard that news he had made a little jump while he happily snapped his fingers. He thought it amazing that this lovely theft had created such attention from the public; With his ingenuity and natural creativity by organizing the museum robbery, Timothy wondered if he had found a new way to promote the Van Gogh Museum, which could result in an increased profit from shop sales.

Thursday, May 16th, was one of the days that Klaas arrived late at work and this time Timothy was waiting for him at the staff entrance and confronted him in regard to his late arrival.

Timothy, hidden from sight approached Klaas and said "Well, well, Klaas you finally arrived; what makes you come to work this late?" Klaas replied "Good morning Timothy, yes sorry, you know the traffic is so bad, even when you come on a bicycle." Timothy looked in contempt at Klaas and said "Well, maybe you just have to leave home a bit early from now on." Klaas, who started to scratch his head, made a grimace and stared away from Timothy in an attempt of something to say. "From tomorrow onwards I will be on time, I promise." Klaas realized that this was Timothy's last warning, as he said nothing but just looked Klaas straight in the eyes while wagging his right index finger in front of Klaas' face.

With the conversation over Klaas went to his work space and had a big smile on his face: because being around the Van Gogh paintings was the most important thing in his life, no complaining or reprimanding boss could ruin that. If he could spend all his time around Van Gogh paintings even, at his home, was all he had always dreamed of And to have this top job as painting restaurateur at the Van Gogh museum was part of that dream.

Later that same day, while Klaas was bending over one of Van Gogh's paintings doing his meticulous restoration work, he looked up in surprise when Timothy suddenly came by for a visit; Timothy hardly ever visited the workshop.

Walking to Klaas' work space in the workshop, Timothy casually asked "What are you working on?" Surprised Klaas answered, "Well, I am working on the 'Wheatfield with Crows' painting, the one that got badly damaged during last month's theft. When that repair is finished I'll continue with the restorations of 'Still Life with Quinces, Pears and Grapes' and 'Still Life with Open Bible'." Timothy seemed to be surprised by the tasks ahead for the work shop staff and continued "Wow, how long is that going to take?" "Well," Klaas explained, scratching his head and looking at his colleague who was sitting at the other end of the workshop they shared, "we are both working on this so I estimate that we have work for at least one year." At that moment Timothy looked at nothing in particular but he asked Klaas "Can we have a chat outside?"

Both of them walked out of the building, and walked to a shady corner next to the building.

Klaas asked, "What is going on?" Timothy replied, "well you are aware of our financial situation and based on the results of the last couple of years, we are now required to cut costs. For that reason the Board of the Van Gogh Museum has decided to lay you off." Klaas who already new about the financial situation, thought that he would have been prepared for such news. However, this news pulled his heart, he tried to imagine a life without Van Gogh and he let his shoulders and head hang down like an old man. Eventually he stammered, "But what about the damaged paintings? What about the treasures that still need to be repaired. Who is going to look after them?"

When Timothy did not answer, Klaas timidly asked him "When do I need to leave then?" "As soon as possible", was the curd reply. Klaas, trying to regain his posture said, "I still have a lot to do on my paintings, could I perhaps stay for another two weeks?" Timothy replied, "No, you need leave way sooner." Klaas, not wanting to give up, proposed "Can I stay on for another week?" much to his relief Timothy agreed with this. With nothing more to say, both men walked back to the staff entrance of the museum to resume their work. Klaas looked up when he heard Timothy ask his colleague, "Can we have a chat outside?"

It wasn't easy for Klaas to wake up the following day, after a restless night., The previous day he'd bicycled back to his home late in the evening, after an extended visit to the pub. He had come home to a dark and quiet house. Klaas lived by himself and he had no pets, instead he had tons of posters on the walls; posters of paintings, mainly Van Gogh's. These posters though were not the only Van Gogh objects he had in his house; most, if not everything surrounding him at home, had some kind of a Van Gogh decoration. His house almost resembled a Van Gogh museum, filled with Van Gogh memorabilia in almost every corner of his house.

When Klaas talked to his parents, he would mainly discuss topics related to Vincent van Gogh, if Vincent van Gogh was not a part of the conversation, the conversation would be very soon over.

So that morning, May, seventeenth, Klaas looked out of his window and saw that it was a typical early spring morning: little sun, some rain and a cloudy sky. He turned around to get his rain jacket when the phone rang. "Is that you darling Klaas?" he heard on the other end, when he picked up the phone. "Yes mom", Klaas replied, "It's me".

Klaas' parents called him regularly and he knew that they did this just to check on him. "Klaas how are you doing?" his mother asked. "Well I lost my job, just as I thought this was going to be a secure job, I got sacked by the bastards." "Oh no," his mother exclaimed, while on the background he heard his father saying "God Damn it." Klaas continued, "I have until next week to finish things and to pack-up. Rumors are going around, that the museum wants to focus more on selling posters of Van Gogh paintings; it is expected that the sale of these posters will be a steady and solid income for the museum." Now talking to his father on the phone, Klaas had to endure some solid straightforward advice, "You'd better look for a new

job at one of the other three museums on The Square.” “Yes, thanks Dad, I am already trying.” Klaas said, “but I have to rush to work now otherwise I will be late; I have to finalize some important work, I’ll talk to you later.” Klaas added in an attempt to finish the conversation. Klaas put the receiver back on the phone and started to get ready for work. Downstairs was his bike, which he was preparing to give a Van Gogh make-over. However, considering today’s weather he decided to take the tram, which allowed him to carry a big suitcase with him, to take his belongings from his office safely back home.

When he arrived at work he found the usual line of visitors outside the building. This morning the visitors were holding umbrellas, or wearing rain coats; it was a gloomy day, a day that you didn't want to spend too much time outside. But when Klaas looked at the staff entrance he briefly stopped his walk: a big truck was parked outside the staff entrance. This was unusual in rainy weather because of fear for rain damage to art pieces. This must be a very important freight, Klaas thought to himself. He noticed that many boxes were being taken from the truck into the museum.

When Klaas went inside, to put his suitcase and his other belongings into his office, he noticed that the damaged paintings he was working on were packed in boxes as well. Klaas turned to his colleagues and asked “What's going on here?” One of his colleagues looked at him and replied “There is a delivery of a huge amount of Van Gogh posters. Timothy has asked us to help unload the trucks.” When all the boxes were unloaded, Klaas decided to take a short break and have a walk through the exhibition hall.

After he looked back when he saw a lot of people hurrying around his office, he noticed a lot of excitement in the shop. Timothy was running up and down trying to organize the storage of some of the posters, to get them ready for the shop to be sold. Shortly after that, another colleague of Klaas' came running towards the shop, and shouted at Timothy, “They were stolen, almost all of them.” Klaas' muscles stiffened as he understood that many Van Gogh paintings in the storage room and from his office were stolen again. He ran to his office and saw to his relief that all his paintings were still there, but he also noticed that many of the recently unloaded boxes had disappeared.

Timothy came in running and screamed, when he saw that many boxes were missing., “Oh no, no, I am organizing a huge marketing campaign on the radio and television for the Van Gogh posters, now they have gone. No! No! No! quick, quick, check outside!”

But it was too late, there was no trace left of the thieves or the boxes. Klaas looked around again and contemplated out loudly “the stupid thieves stole the boxes with posters instead of the real paintings.”

Timothy looked at Klaas and his colleague in frustration and hissed in fury, “If the thieves had taken the real paintings, then it would not have been such a disaster. Yet now my whole poster-sales campaign is ruined.” With that said, it became very quiet around Timothy, and he quickly left in vain and hoped that people would forget his comments.

The next day when Klaas arrived at work, he couldn't believe his eyes; there was a much longer line than usual outside the museum. In fact, it was impossible for Klaas to make his usual cut through the line to get to the entrance of the museum. He needed to go around the building to approach the entrance from the square. When Klaas finally entered the building, he was immediately ordered to help taking the paintings from the wall, which were then replaced by posters. "What the hell is going on here, exchanging the paintings for posters on the wall?" Klaas asked in horror to no-one in particular.

He immediately went to see Timothy who explained to him "There is suddenly a huge demand for the Van Gogh posters so we decided to create some extra space and put those real paintings aside" and he pointed with contempt towards where the painting were stored. While making a little dance, Timothy added, "Next year, 1992, there will be hopefully another Van Gogh year, which will be another chance for me to cash-in."

Klaas was surprised and asked "None of the visitors wants to see the real paintings anymore?" While he casually snapped the fingers of his right hand in the air Timothy replied that "The days of real paintings were over. I created a mass graze. If the camel once gets his nose in the tent, his body will follow soon" After this revelation Klaas, threw his hands with dismay in the air and walked away.

Over the course of days the line of people for the museum became increasingly longer so Klaas had to use all his bicycle skills to avoid any collision with the people in the line. Occasionally there were scuffles between the waiting people, while intervening security guards tried to prevent any mass fights.

It was idiotic that people could behave that way. It seemed as if all sense had disappeared once they were obsessed with the Van Gogh posters.

Timothy took to the floor in today's board meeting of the Van Gogh museum, "I have determined the equilibrium between the number of poster buyers and the number of available posters to keep the visitors engaged in buying posters and to keep the price of posters as high as possible." The Vice President of the board reacted by saying "We are a non-profit organization and not a business!" While looking around the table he continued "Who agrees with that?" All board members hesitatingly raised their hands, while Timothy interrogatively looked at the Vice President. The Vice President continued "In order to keep our non-profit status we need to make sure that our profits from the poster sales are not disclosed to the tax agency." Timothy now looked with approval at the Vice President and was confident that his marketing plan was well designed and would succeed.

After this Timothy got up and walked in thoughts towards the window from where he could see the museum shop. He stood there for a short time, while the other board members observed him. Finally he said, "That's an excellent idea, let's immediately implement this, because the shop is packed with people. Look at it! There are tens of thousands if not more guilders to make today."

The promotion of the Museum Management to let the poster auction run its course freely created ludicrous situations. A fine example of such a situation occurred on Klaas' last day at the Van Gogh museum.

That day Klaas walked toward the museum shop when he saw a few hundred people pushing and then rushing to the shop counter. One of the sellers said, "Here is a beautiful poster Starry Night, not many left, who offers one hundred guilders?" Immediately someone said, "I offer two hundred guilders!" In quick succession the price of the poster went up and the poster was sold when the seller at the desk declared "This poster of the Starry Night goes to the gentleman in the yellow raincoat for one thousand guilders." Klaas couldn't believe this, the price of the posters reached fifty times the regular price, and he had a feeling this was only the start.

Later that afternoon, at around three o'clock, the situation escalated. Klaas heard a commotion in the exhibition room: the auction had moved from the shop to the last posters in the exhibition room.

Timothy was at the center of the commotion, he had taken over the auctioning of the posters and was creating a hectic environment by waving his arms erratically whilst pointing at posters and people in quick succession. It seemed that the more excitement there was the higher the price of the poster went. Klaas was standing at the side of the exhibition room and heard Timothy say "Five thousand guilders, does anybody offer more? Yes! This lady here in the front has just offered six thousand guilders, sold!" At that moment, with only a handful of posters left, a fight broke out because people tried to get their hands on the last posters. During this fight there was a lot of screaming as one might expect, but above all Timothy was clearly heard saying "Ladies and gentlemen, there are only a few posters left, please keep calm, otherwise you will be unable to buy the remaining posters. I beg you, please stay calm."

There was no calmness when Klaas ran out of the exhibition room straight to his office. Along the way he saw many paintings scattered left and right as if they were trash. Yesterday Klaas had wrapped the paintings he was repairing in carton and bubble-wrap for good protection. He had put the paintings in his big suitcase that he took it with him upon leaving the building. On his way to the tram he thought to himself that the situation at the museum was going out of hand and that these paintings may never get repaired or worse, damaged or destroyed. It would be better if I save all my paintings and repair them at home.

As the suitcase barely fitted through the doors, Klaas was only just about able to take the suitcase into the tram thereby blocking off most of the the tram's corridor. The big suitcase attracted some attention from the tram passengers but Klaas stood casually next to his suitcase. One particular passenger who slightly wiggled his body to the loud music that played on his Walkman asked loudly as if to drown out the sound of his Walkman "have you just robbed a museum or what? Your suitcase is as big as the paintings I have seen in the Van

Gogh Museum.” Klaas nervously smiled a faint smile while he shrugged his shoulders and quickly looked out of the tram window.

A few days later Klaas was at home enjoying a morning cup of tea when he heard a few firm knocks on the door. Alerted he put his cup down and stared for a moment at his desk where the Van Gogh paintings were laying. He put the knuckles of his fists carefully on the table and stood up to lean over the table for a bit. He then quickly put the paintings he was working on in his suitcase, which was still laying in the corner of his room. Klaas then moved away from the table and walked with careful steps towards the door.

There were some more knocks on the door, this time the knocks were firmer and more persistent. Klaas abruptly stopped and stared at the door, he continued to approach the door and eventually opened it. After Klaas had opened the door he saw two police officers standing in front of him. One of the Officers confirmed Klaas’ identity and after showing him a house warrant he said, “We like to come in to check on a few things and have a little chat with you.” Once inside the second Police Officer asked, “So you worked until recently at the Van Gogh museum, didn’t you?” “That’s right” Klaas answered. The first Police Officer looked with piercing eyes at all the Van Gogh artifacts Klaas had collected over the years. By now Klaas started to perspire as the police officers approached the suitcase with the Van Gogh paintings.

With sweat in his palms, Klaas was about to confess when the second Police Officer opened the suitcase and the first Police Officer asked “Are that Van Gogh paintings?” Klaas eyes started to well up while he answered “Yes, and I can explain...” yet the first Police Officer interrupted “There is no need to explain, we have seen enough.” The first Police Officer continued “It’s shocking. Last night there was another theft of a few Van Gogh posters from the Van Gogh museum. We are looking for the posters, if you see them, please contact us. Have a good day.”

After the Police Officers had left, Klaas sat down in shock, holding his Van Gogh cup with tea in his heavily trembling hands.

A month later when Klaas woke up in the middle of the night, it was bright enough from the moonshine to see clearly. He got up and sat on the side of his bed and looked at yesterday’s newspaper which was laying on the ground. The newspaper heading said, “Complete Board of the Van Gogh Museum convicted of corruption and bribery charges.” The news article started as follows: “The City Courthouse of Amsterdam convicted yesterday the whole Board of the Van Gogh Museum. After three days of hearings it became clear with overwhelming evidence that the Board premeditated and deliberately acted to maximize revenue at all cost. The board used excessive and illegal measures to enrich themselves with hundreds of thousands of guilders made from profits of many unimaginable overpriced Van Gogh poster sales.”

After reading this, Klaas took a deep breath and looked out of the window while a rare crow

flew by his window and landed on the sill of Klaas' window. The crow tapped with his beak on the window, Klaas stood up and walked to the window to open it. It, squeaked when it was carefully pushed open. The crow flew away and Klaas' gaze followed it until it eventually disappeared in a scrub bush below the Starry Night.

The bright moonshine shined on the newspaper, where clearly one could read the rest of the newspaper article, that ended with "The former defamed Van Gogh conservationist got his honor restored by a public accolade for his unbelievable love for the Van Gogh paintings and outstanding service to the Van Gogh museum; the conservationist got his job back and was also appointed for a honorary position on the Van Gogh Museum Board.

It looks like the mass graze has ended, the real Van Gogh paintings are once again hanging on walls in the Van Gogh museum and interest in the real painting has returned. It is a mystery why so many people behaved so gullible and paid extraordinary prices for Van Gogh posters."

Postface

On April 14th there was a huge theft at the Van Gogh museum. It was the biggest art theft in the Netherlands in terms of money. Many famous paintings were stolen and some badly damaged.

<https://art-crime.blogspot.com/2016/09/april-14-1990-museum-theft-van-gogh.html>

After I wrote this story I found this video: do you recognize any analogies between the story and the video?

<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2xd0uu>

Machiel van der Stelt was born and raised in the Netherlands, lived for 7 years in the United States of America and lives now in Australia. He just started out writing and this is his third short story in a series of other short stories.

It is May 1991 one month after the spectacular theft at the Van Gogh museum where a total of one billion of guilders of paintings were stolen. Klaas who is a dedicated Van Gogh museum conservationist for the last five years, absolutely loves Van Gogh and collects everything with a Van Gogh decoration. But with this theft his life and work are put up side down and it seems he is losing everything he loves. Can Klaas turn the tide?

In this historical drama-comedy you will discover that justice will prevail over greed, lies and corruption, whatever time it takes.